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Rebuilding Lebanon

No one will be safe if Hizbullah wins.

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Fighting terrorism is not unlike fighting malaria. It is not enough to swat the mosquitoes; it is necessary to drain the swamps where they breed. In Lebanon today terrorists find safe haven, sustenance and inspiration. In the rubble of its cities, a new generation, which has never known anything but killing, is learning to hate all things Western while it grows big enough to handle an AK-47.

To attack international terrorism, it is essential to try to solve the multiple and maddening problems of Lebanon. Tracking down the original hijackers of TWA Flight 847 and closing the Beirut airport won't do the trick. Ill-considered or poorly executed attacks on suspected terrorists may only succeed in replacing today's Republic of Nihilism with something even more dangerous: the Islamic Republic of Lebanon.

Preventing such a vulture from hatching should be the goal of the United States and its allies, especially Israel. An Islamic Republic of Lebanon would be unlikely to show any more compassion toward its own people than its eccentric role model in Iran does; it could only increase the dangers of another war between Israel and its Arab neighbors; and it would pose grave new threats to the remaining moderate Arab states, especially Jordan. "If Lebanon, always the most secular and Western-looking Arab nation, succumbs to fundamentalism, then who is safe?" asks one prominent Arab diplomat in Washington.

Of course, no one but the Lebanese can remake Lebanon. The Americans already have tried and failed. So have the French, the Israelis and the Syrians. But instead of continuing to prop up an archaic minority regime, the United States should begin to champion the long overdue reform of Lebanon's 1943 unwritten "national pact," which is based on the country's even more antiquated 1932 census.

Failure: A series of missed opportunities and diplomatic blunders has alienated moderate Shiites; they want a fair share of political and economic power, not a fundamentalist theocracy that will try to force Lebanon's middle class out of its Ted Lapidus suits and into Iranian basic black. The Reagan administration had an opportunity to take up the moderate Shiites' cause in 1983, when Nabih Berri and other leaders ignored Syrian attempts to foment a rebellion against Christian President Amin Gemayel. But Washington failed to pressure Gemayel to negotiate with the Shiites and the moment slipped away.

What the United States could do now is adopt a two-track policy, seeking to undermine radicals such as the Hizbullah (Party of God) and at the same time trying to help Berri and other relatively moderate Shiites. Whatever hard feelings the hijacking has left, Berri remains far more reasonable than his radical rivals. Washington should consider covert aid to his mainstream Amal—even though such a move would spark a firestorm in Congress—and should begin pressing Lebanon's Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim leaders to share power more equitably with the Shiites. The United States should also encourage Israel's efforts to make a separate peace with Amal leaders in southern Lebanon, where Israeli occupation has swelled the ranks of the Hizbullah.

It will be impossible to attack the problems of Lebanon without going to their roots in Iran and Syria. U.S. intelligence has drawn a fairly accurate map of Iran's terrorist infrastructure. But American officials now believe the speaker of Iran's Parliament, Hojatolislam Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, whom they regard as a relative moderate, helped free the four Americans held captive by the Hizbullah and some even suspect that Rafsanjani may want to end Iran's running war with the West. However unlikely that seems, it would be foolish to take any action now which would only drive Iran deeper into the Koran.

Instead, Washington's first effort should be to weaken Iran's link to the Lebanese fundamentalists by prodding Syria. Although the United States and Syria disagree on most other aspects of Mideast politics, Islamic fundamentalism is an anathema to Damascus—and to Syria's patrons in Moscow. The United States should seek to build on the unusual U.S.-Syrian cooperation which helped free the 39 American hostages by pressing President Hafez Assad to crack down on Hizbullah, Islamic Amal and other fundamentalist cells in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Assad's room for maneuver is limited by his alliance with Iran against Iraq, and his government has conspired with the terrorists in the past. But Syrian action in the Bekaa Valley is preferable to American military or covert action there. Assad should be warned that if he does not take action to free the remaining hostages—seven Americans, four French and one Briton—and to rein in the fundamentalists, the United States and its allies will consider terrorist targets in Lebanon as fair game.

Admittedly, the prospects for success are poor. But the alternatives are worse. An Islamic Republic of Lebanon would serve not only as a haven for today's terrorists but as a cradle for tomorrow's as well.

ALAIN NOGUES—SYGMA

Rubble of the Shatila refugee camp: Searching for ways to head off another Islamic republic